

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact:

Judith Ingram, Communications Director,

*(202) 523-3240 begin_of_the_skype_highlighting (202) 523-3240 en
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, ext. 127*

WASHINGTON-The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent, bipartisan federal agency, has sent a letter requesting that President Bush candidly address Vietnam's worsening human rights conditions in his meeting this week with Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet.

"Continued arrests of free speech, democracy and religious freedom advocates will further isolate Vietnam from the international community and harm the positive trajectory of U.S.-Vietnamese relations," Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer wrote in the letter, which was sent Wednesday.

Presidents Bush and Triet are set to meet at the White House on Friday during a visit reflecting growing ties between the two countries. But the Commission notes that Vietnam's progress toward improved religious freedom and other human rights practices has stalled recently: In addition to detentions and arrests of democracy and human rights advocates, various restrictions have been imposed on members of religious communities in Vietnam, targeting ethnic minority Protestants, Khmer Buddhists, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Vietnamese Mennonites, and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

"Contravening Vietnamese and international law, the Vietnamese government views peaceful advocacy for legal and political reforms, as well as religious freedom, as national security threats," Gaer wrote in the letter. "This is not a firm foundation on which to proceed with normal bilateral relations with the United States or any other country."

Following is the full text of the letter:

June 20, 2007

The Honorable George W. Bush
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave
Washington DC, 20005

Dear Mr. President,

Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet's visit to the White House this week offers an opportunity to throw a spotlight on the deteriorating human rights conditions that are marring the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship.

In your Prague speech on democracy-building earlier this month, you said that the lesson of recent history is that "freedom can be resisted, and freedom can be delayed, but freedom cannot be denied." The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recommends that you convey that message directly to President Triet. Continued arrests of free speech, democracy and religious freedom advocates will further isolate Vietnam from the international community and harm the positive trajectory of U.S.-Vietnamese relations.

Since its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) on Jan. 11, 2007, the Government of Vietnam has detained democracy, labor, legal reform, free speech, labor, religious freedom and other human rights advocates. Over 30 individuals have been arrested and detained. The most enduring image of the current crackdown is the video of security agents physically silencing Father Nguyen Van Ly during his trial. Several others, including lawyers Nguyen Van Dai and Li Thi Cong Nhan, were sentenced on similar charges.

The cases of Fr. Ly, Nguyen Van Dai, and Li Thi Cong Nhan, in particular, have important implications for religious freedom in Vietnam. Religious leaders and religious freedom advocates have become prominent voices in Vietnam's dissident community. They have founded free speech, democracy, and human rights organizations.

Both Fr. Ly and Nguyen Van Dai were arrested and convicted under charges related to "propagandizing against the state" and "collecting evidence of Vietnam's religious persecution" to send to "enemy powers and overseas reactionaries." Contravening Vietnamese and international law, the Vietnamese government views peaceful advocacy for legal and political reforms, as well as religious freedom, as national security threats. This is not a firm foundation on which to proceed with normal bilateral relations with the United States or any other country.

The United States designated Vietnam as a "country of particular concern" in 2004. It lifted the CPC designation in November 2006 citing measurable progress—a position the Commission thought premature. Recently, progress has stalled, and in the past year there have been additional arrests, short-term detentions, harassment, and other restrictions on members of religious communities in Vietnam, targeting ethnic minority Protestants, Khmer Buddhists, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Vietnamese Mennonites, and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

Past dialogue on religious freedom conditions proved productive. The Commission urges you to persuade President Triet to resume that dialogue and to improve conditions for Vietnam's diverse religious communities.

The Commission also recommends that you discuss with President Triet ways to improve human rights protections in Vietnam in the long term, including:

- lifting remaining restrictions on religious practice;
- accounting for hundreds of individuals arrested after peaceful 2001 and 2004 demonstrations; and
- creating technical assistance programs to bolster in-country refugee processing, create new economic development programs for ethnic minorities, and help Vietnam meet its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The Commission also recommends that U.S. assistance programs in Vietnam be designed to help Vietnam's emerging civil society and help Vietnam meet its obligations under the ICCPR. We request that you pursue agreements with the Vietnamese government to utilize U.S. foreign assistance programs to more effectively integrate Vietnam into the international community.

Mr. President, we urge you to use your meeting with President Triet to underline that it is unacceptable for any respected member of the international community to repress peaceful religious and political dissent. It hurts Vietnam's standing in the world, and it damages the growing relationship between our two countries.

Sincerely,

Felice D. Gaer
Chair

Cc: Stephen Hadley
Ambassador Michael Kozak

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Felice D. Gaer

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